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## LOUIS ADOLPHE THIERS

The history of France during the nineteenth century presents a shifting phantasmagoria of revolutions, *coups d'état*, and short-lived governments. Four kings were made and unmade during this brief period, and on three distinct occasions the country was proclaimed a Republic. The most striking phenomenon of the age, however, was not this rapid governmental see-sawing, but rather the appearance of a group of men, who, for want of a better name, may be characterized as "literary statesmen." As a rule, men of letters confine their attempts towards the amelioration of social and political wrongs to the pages of their books. Governmental posts are, if not abhorrent to them, at least foreign to their desires. Dickens, who probably did more towards aiding his suffering fellow-countrymen of the lower classes than did even Peel or Gladstone, never aspired to civic honors. With the notable exception of Goethe and others of the Weimar circle, the same can be said of German writers, while similar conditions prevailed in France, too, until the nineteenth century. With the beginning of this epoch, however, French *littérateurs* began to cast envious glances towards the domain of politics. The government and the petty office-holder became the frequently employed theme of Balzac, Maupassant, and the other brilliant *raconteurs* of the age. The great intellects perceived and answered the demand which the French nation was making for leaders of just that stamp. Victor Hugo, whose long life and numerous activities were practically coeval with the century, is to-day recognized both as the keenest mind in the French Romantic movement and as one of the foremost statesmen of his day. Lamartine, whose opportunities after the Revolution of 1848 which dethroned Louis-Philippe, were only eclipsed in greatness by his failure; Guizot, whose star had its ascendant as well as descendant during the reign of Louis-Philippe; and later, though not lesser, lights such as Jules Simon, Gambetta, and de Rémusat; all are characteristic of the metamorphosis that had occurred in the ranks of French men of letters. But far and away

the brightest star in the realms of literary statesmanship was that shrewd diplomat and "illustrious historian" whose life and work form the subject of this article, Louis Adolphe Thiers.

Louis Adolphe Thiers was born in Marseilles, on the sixteenth of April, 1797. His father, an ex-Jacobin, had been a poor but respectable cloth-merchant, trading to the Levant, who had been forced by the counter-revolution of 1793 to flee from France in order to save his life. When the country had been restored to a state of tranquillity, he returned and took up the locksmith trade. Already a widower, he was attracted by a certain Mlle. Arnic, of Marseilles, and despite the strenuous objections of the young lady's parents, the two were married. This event caused a break in the relations of the young bride and her mother, and not until the former had given birth to Louis Adolphe, a healthy, strapping baby, were the two reconciled. The child passed part of his youth in the city of his birth, and part in a Provençal country villa, where he ran wild with the peasant boys of the vicinity. Thus he spent his earliest years developing a strong physical constitution, though displaying no signs of any marked mental precocity.

When it was time for the lad to begin his schooling, he received an appointment, through his cousin, Marie Joseph Chénier, to one of the lycées that had been established by Napoleon at Marseilles. Though he made good progress in his studies, his naturally free spirits vexed his teachers to such an extent that he came perilously near being expelled from the institution. He was saved by the arrival at the lycée of a new master, and his surplus energies were diverted to more praiseworthy channels. As he grew older, he acquired a fondness for writing out descriptions of Napoleon's most renowned battles, from the peerless general's own bulletins; in this way, he was sowing the seed of the rich historical harvest he was to reap in later years.

Though his schooling was acquired only by dint of much physical hardship, due to pecuniary disabilities, Thiers stuck nobly to his task. In the company of congenial friends, most particularly of his fellow law-student Mignet, he did not permit the horizon of his future to be clouded over by depressing

doubts. Through the aid of Mignet, too, he won his first literary success—a prize offered by a Paris commission for the best monograph on a celebrated Frenchman of the eighteenth century, and awarded to Thiers' essay on the moralist and miscellaneous writer, the Marquis de Vauvenargues (1715-1747). In the year 1829, at the age of twenty-three, he completed his law course at the college of Aix, and, after considerable difficulty, succeeded in being admitted to the Paris bar. But he felt powerfully drawn towards a career of letters, and he determined to abandon the legal profession at the earliest possible opportunity.

Thiers received his first real start in life by obtaining, through the recommendation of the far-famed Talleyrand, the position of private secretary to the Duc de Liancourt. This, however, was only a stepping-stone towards the realization of his cherished ambition of entering the field of journalism. By means of a rather surprising criticism of an art exhibit at the Salon, he attracted the attention of the editor of the *Constitutionnel*, then one of the leading Parisian journals, and was admitted to its staff. He had an inborn genius for newspaper work, and he soon earned popular notice by his clever articles in opposition to the priest party under Charles X. His friendship with Talleyrand gained him, in 1822, the principal direction of the *Constitutionnel*, which he maintained for a period of seven years. He saved money industriously, so that he might be enabled to carry out his desire of becoming an independent editor. With his former schoolmate Mignet and others, he founded the *National*, a paper antagonistic to the rule of Charles X. His activity against the reigning monarch and in the Revolution of July, 1830, which was terminated by the abdication of Charles X and the succession of Louis-Philippe, introduced Thiers into the domain of politics, for which he abandoned that of journalism.

An event which founded Thiers' literary fame and also gained him political prominence was the completion, at about this time, of his first great work, the *History of the French Revolution*. No previous French writer had dared to speak

well of any one who had taken part in the Revolution. From childhood up an ardent Bonapartist, Thiers attempted, in his history, to justify to the eyes of the world his idol and all those who had been parties to the Napoleonic schemes of world-subjugation. The work earned an almost instantaneous popularity, but has since been the target of all sorts of critical shafts, from glorification down to vilification. Carlyle's opinion runs as follows: "The work is as far as possible from meriting its high reputation, but its author is a brisk man in his way, and will tell you much if you know nothing." De Rémusat, on the other hand, said of it that it was "the first time that the history of such a period had been written with so much life and vigor." Suffice it to say that the work, though it has numerous defects, is, notwithstanding, a valuable source for reference, and remains to this day an authority on the subject of the French Revolution.

Besides being violently opposed to the rule of Charles X, Thiers was instrumental in placing Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orleans, on the French throne. He refused an offer of a ministerial portfolio from the king, preferring to serve his apprenticeship in the lower departments of governmental administration. He was elected, in 1830, to the House of Deputies by the college at Aix, and thenceforth his rise was rapid. Two years later, he became Minister of the Interior in the Soult Cabinet, in which capacity he rendered his monarch valuable assistance in several intestine crises. His fame as a writer and politician had already spread through France, so that, on the death of Andrieux in 1833 he was elected to fill the vacancy in the French Academy; on the occasion of his admission into the "Forty Immortals," he delivered a brilliant panegyric on his predecessor. His services were felt by the king to be so necessary that he was appointed Prime Minister in 1836; during the next fourteen years a fierce duel for political supremacy, with various turns of fortune, was waged between him and Louis-Philippe's favorite, Guizot.

The policies that Thiers and Guizot developed were practically antipodal. The chief bone of contention was the extent

of the royal power; Guizot was willing to grant the king an active share in the government, while Thiers, on several occasions, expressed the maxim that "The king reigns, but does not govern." The consequence of Thiers' attitude was that he did not enjoy the royal favor long. Only a few months after he had accepted the premiership, he and the king clashed on the subject of the Carlist War in Spain, and the result was Thiers' resignation from the Cabinet. For four years he absented himself from the domain of politics, traveling and observing extensively. Upon his return to France, he commenced almost immediately a campaign of parliamentary opposition, which succeeded in making him, for the second time, president of the Council, and also Minister for Foreign Affairs. Again he was doomed to a speedy downfall, and again he was forced to bow to the supremacy of his rival.

The cause of this second defeat of Thiers was the Turkish question, which at that time was producing frequent qualms of anxiety among the great Powers of Europe. Mehemet Ali, by defeating his master, the Sultan Mahmud II, had become master of Egypt, Syria, and Arabia, though nominally a vassal to Mahmud's successor, the youthful Abd-ul-Mejid. The European nations, with the exception of France, desired to limit Mehemet's power, while Guizot claimed for him the pashalik of Egypt. Thiers, on assuming the foreign ministry, even went further, and demanded for him the government of Syria, in addition. He carried on negotiations with Ali which seemed to prove to the British Government, which was especially hostile to the Mussulman, that he was attempting to effect a settlement in accordance with French views. This apparently underhand action forced the Powers into a treaty, by which certain terms were offered to Mehemet, a refusal of which would bring about armed intervention on behalf of the Sultan. This treaty caused immediate excitement in France; Thiers clamored for war with England, and even the peaceful Louis-Philippe was for a moment carried away by the jingoistic ardor. The actual appearance of armed assistance from the Powers soon reduced Mehemet's position, and the French passion gradually began to cool.

Thiers' continuous demands for war were ignored by the king, the consequence being that the foreign minister's resignation was received and accepted, and a new cabinet formed. Guizot, as foreign secretary, joined with Lord Palmerston, who held that post in the English ministry, and the Turco-Egyptian question was settled to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Once again Thiers consigned himself to political oblivion. He had married, in 1834, a Mlle. Dosne, a beautiful young "pension" girl, who had brought him a considerable dowry. Though their union was blessed by the birth of only one child, a daughter, who died at an early age, it was comparatively tranquil and happy. Mme. Thiers was an accomplished woman, a charming hostess, a careful house-keeper. But she is of particular interest to us through the fact that her linguistic proficiency was of invaluable assistance to her husband in the work on which he was occupied during his second retirement, namely, his *History of the Consulate and the Empire*. Her knowledge of English and German enabled her to translate for her husband documents needed by him in the compilation of this, his second great historical undertaking. The *Histoire* was a colossal enterprise, involving the most diligent and minute documentary studies. Its twenty volumes appeared at irregular intervals between the years 1845 and 1861. The vast inquiry into the origins of modern France which this composition necessitated broadened Thiers' views and judgments, and removed the deep-seated prejudices which are so apparent in his history of the Revolution. His work became more detailed, while in character-drawing, as evinced particularly by his portrait of Napoleon I, he proved himself a master. His second historical production is noteworthy for the simplicity and clearness with which events are described, and for its faithful and intelligent representation of the administration of public affairs. It was considered by many the "most magnificent monument of contemporary French literature," and was properly consecrated by the Academy.

When he had remained in his retreat for six years, Thiers decided to reënter public life. But while making a renewed

bid for power, he observed that Louis-Philippe's star was fast waning. On the precipitation of a crisis, Guizot and his Cabinet resigned, and the panic-stricken king offered the prime ministry to Thiers, who respectfully waived the honor. He perceived the anti-monarchical inclinations of the proletariat, and the best he could do was to assist in the rescue of a king who had never shown a true appreciation of the faithful services his subject had rendered him. Scarcely had Louis-Philippe been got out of Paris, after the short but bloody Revolution of 1848, when Lamartine, in the name of the Provisional Government, formally inaugurated the Second French Republic. After a sharp contest between Republicans and Monarchists, the latter party succeeded in having its candidate, Louis-Napoleon, elected president of the new government.

If Thiers had been one of the chief actors of Louis-Philippe's official circle, he was merely an understudy during the larger part of Louis-Napoleon's principate. When, after a four years' presidency, Louis-Napoleon carried out the daring *coup d'état* of 1852, which put him on the throne as Napoleon III, Thiers, together with the other anti-monarchical deputies, was thrown into the gloomy prison at Mazas. He was soon removed from confinement, but, as compensation, was banished from the country. The year of his exile, which he spent in Continental travel, was ended by a general amnesty which gave permission to all to return to their native country.

On regaining Paris, Thiers found that he was *persona non grata* in political circles. Consequently, he entered a third period of seclusion, during which he did most of the work on his second historical composition, already discussed. Besides, he spent considerable time in the study of foreign literature and scientific researches. His evenings he gave up to the brilliant social intercourse of the gay French capital. For eleven years he played the rôles of social lion and dilettante with admirable success; his *salon* was one of the most popular in upper diplomatic circles.

At last, in 1863, Thiers was afforded the opportunity of resuming his political activities through his election by a Paris constituency to the House of Deputies. For seven years he re-



maintained the leader and mouthpiece of a small band of anti-Imperialists in the Chamber, and was regarded as "the most formidable enemy of the Empire." His return to politics was hailed with joyful acclamations by all sections of the country, which was cowering under the mailed glove of the despotic Emperor. He conducted a campaign of criticism and reproach which fairly shook the Empire; the wily old politician styled the government "a monarchy kneeling to the democracy." The outcome of the Seven Weeks' War of 1866, which gave to Prussia the hegemony of the German states under the able rulership of William I and his chancellor, Bismarck, brought about Thiers' rapid recognition as the sole personage capable of coping with the situation.

Thiers bent all his energies towards evading a Prussian war, at least until his country should be in a position to risk such a costly and debilitating enterprise. To strengthen France, he sought to have the emperor contract foreign alliances and prepare an army worthy of the prospective foe, but, in the face of a hostile ministry, it was impossible for him to persuade Louis-Napoleon of the unpreparedness of the nation. He openly lamented the fact that, in trying to maintain peace, "he was fulfilling the most painful duty of his life." When everyone desired the outbreak of hostilities, and the mob was shouting "To Berlin," Thiers' pacifist policy was the only pleasing note in the hoarse cacophony, but it brought him to the verge of political disaster. The leader of the war party, Léon Gambetta, occupied towards Thiers the same relative position that Guizot had held during the reign of Louis-Philippe. And even when Prussian aggression made the war inevitable, Thiers did not abandon his pacific attitude, but directed his attention towards obtaining an honorable cessation of hostilities on the earliest possible occasion.

The slaughter of the French at Metz and the capitulation of the entire army at Sedan struck the death-knell of Louis-Napoleon's untimely ambitions; in his despair, he saw that the only alternative was abdication. For the third time within a century the French Government substituted democracy for monarchy.

On the 4th of September, 1870, a provisional Republic was established, upon which developed the duty of continuing the conflict with Prussia. But as the German arms had won such signal successes, there seemed little hope for the triumph of France. In this moment of urgency, the government again looked to Thiers as the man of the hour. At its behest, an armistice of two months was spent by him in a diplomatic tour of the European capitals, for the purpose of enlisting the aid of the Powers in the French cause. He met with a kind reception everywhere, but found the nations unwilling to declare for either of the belligerents, and, accordingly, he retraced his steps homeward, without having accomplished anything. His reëntry into his native land was anything but encouraging. He saw that the people had been inflamed by Gambetta during his absence, and were clamoring for a renewal of the war. With the greatest difficulty he reached Paris, where he accomplished the most unpleasant task of persuading the Assembly to consent to a lengthening of the armistice.

The National Assembly, which had been driven by the imminence of danger from Paris to Bordeaux in southern France, proclaimed a general election of deputies. The result of this election was decisive. Because of his undisguised interest in the national welfare, Thiers was returned to the Assembly as the representative of twenty-one governmental departments. For more than twenty years he had almost invariably been on the right side in administrative disputes, and he was now rewarded by the confidence of all parties. When, at the first session of the new Assembly, the business of electing a National President arose, there was no doubt as to the choice of the nation. In the words of M. de Meaux: "Thiers was inevitable." In this nerve-racking period of uncertainty, he was universally recognized as the only pilot able to steer the ship of state past the shoals of poverty and distress to the haven of peace and prosperity. All political differences were cast to the winds, and Thiers was elected, practically unanimously, the First President of the Third French Republic. His official title was "Chief of the Executive Power of the French Republic." He was now the head of a

legal polity; he wielded immense authority, as the words "M. Thiers wants it so" spoken at Bordeaux, or later at Versailles, were sufficient to bring into line all the opponents of any measure he desired to have put on the statute books.

Just how Thiers stood on the matter of the ultimate form of the French Government caused all parties considerable perplexity. The Republicans were confident that he was their leader, and were strengthened in this belief by his assertion, on ascending the presidential chair, that he would make a "loyal experiment in republican government." The Monarchists, on the other hand, were equally confident that as soon as he had extricated the country from the entanglements ensuing from the still untermiated war, Thiers would step aside, and allow the rightful heir to ascend the throne. The president was too sagacious to make these Royalists his enemies, so that for a time, he was compelled to maintain a rather ambiguous attitude.

Approximately three months after his election, Thiers was forced, by the ceaseless heckling of the three monarchical parties, to explain his position. He did this in a vigorous speech, delivered before the Assembly on February 19, 1871; he drew a vivid picture of the country's pitiful condition, and urged all, Royalists and Republicans alike, to combine in carrying through his programme of "pacifying, reorganizing, restoring credit, and reviving work, so as to place the nation on a sound financial basis." And then he came out with his celebrated dictum, now termed the "Bordeaux compact: "After credit has been restored and prosperity reëstablished, then and then only, will it be time to think of the form of government to be imposed upon the nation. All parties must drop their differences and consolidate upon the arduous task of procuring happiness and general welfare."

As he himself indicated, Thiers' task, upon entering office, was three-fold: he had, first of all, to conclude a satisfactory peace with Prussia; he had to repair the country's financial state; and he had to give his people a permanent and durable form of government. He was pledged to the peace party, and, as "first citizen of the land," he was given power to treat for terms with

the greatest diplomat of the age, Prince von Bismarck. The struggle was heart-rending. The two intermediaries met in Paris, and peace negotiations were opened at once. The terms, as presented by Prussia, included the following items: The surrender of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and the city of Metz, and the payment of the immense indemnity of six milliards of francs. Thiers was indignant at the enormity of these considerations, and pleaded, almost tearfully, with the German Emperor and his Chancellor, to diminish the ransom and to allow France to retain Metz and Belfort. His fervent appeal was effective: the indemnity was reduced to five milliards and Belfort remained French territory. The preliminary peace was signed by Thiers and Favre for France and by Bismarck for Prussia. The Chief Executive then repaired to Bordeaux where, after a spirited struggle, he obtained the ratification of the treaty by a vote of 546 to 107.

The second of Thiers' great tasks was the restoration of prosperity. This was made especially difficult by the fact that the huge indemnity had to be collected, in large part, from direct taxes upon the already fearfully impoverished people. But the nation responded nobly and willingly. During Thiers' administration, France enjoyed an era of unexampled happiness and prosperity. The harvests were rich, commerce flourished, and the nation, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of a calamitous war, soon recovered its former rank among the world powers. The installments of the indemnity were paid off in an incredibly short time, so that on March 18, 1873, only a little more than a year after the signing of the preliminary peace, Thiers could announce in the Assembly that the final convention had been drawn up in Berlin, that all German troops had evacuated the country, and that France's liberation from alien intrusion was now a *fait accompli*. In recognition of his loyal services, the Assembly had, towards the end of the year 1872, conferred upon him the title of "President of the French Republic," for a term of seven years, thus putting an end to the provisional circumstances under which he had hitherto held his office.

This honor, however, soon produced in the ranks of the

Monarchists the feeling that Thiers was determined to make a republic of France. During the process of national reconstruction, they gave the president his way in whatever he wanted. But after the peace treaty had been successfully negotiated and the country was on the road to prosperity once more, they began a steady attack upon the Chief Magistrate and his most intimate ministers. The time for hedging was soon at an end. The Assembly and the people were desirous of establishing a permanent form of government by drawing up a constitution. Although the Monarchists possessed a large majority in the Assembly, Thiers felt that the electorate would support him to a man. As a consequence, he threw off his mask, and came out unreservedly, in a presidential message of November, 1872, for the continuance of the "Conservative Republic." The message aroused wild tumult in the Chamber. The anti-Republican deputies turned against the president, and it was only by means of his ever-ready tool, the threat to resign, that he carried the day. For four months the debate waxed hotter and hotter, until it became evident to all that Thiers was steadily losing ground. The Monarchists, forgetting the benefits the country had gleaned during Thiers' wise guidance, and without a definite candidate in view for the throne of the Bonapartes, determined that the President must go. "Thiers' services, the superhuman tasks he had just accomplished—all this was at once admitted and omitted." The immense power that he had been wielding was the cause of his downfall, as the Royalists had decided that the country had had enough of his tyranny. On a decisive motion, placed before the Assembly on May 24, 1873, Thiers was overwhelmingly outvoted; the Cabinet surrendered its portfolios, the President tendered his resignation and those of his ministers, and the man who had occupied the public eye for fifty years was definitively and irreparably defeated. He had, however, attained his most ardent wish; in the absence of a suitable successor to the throne, Monarchists and Republicans united in electing Marshall MacMahon, one of the central figures of the Franco-Prussian war, president of the French Republic. Though Thiers had to retire from active service, he had the satisfaction of knowing

that his country had remained, and probably would remain throughout future generations, a conservative democracy.

After a short Continental tour, during the course of which he was everywhere greeted with a reception almost regal in its lavishness, Thiers retired into privacy. The last four years of his life were spent in recovering his valuable collections, large parts of which had been lost during the turbulent days of the Paris Commune, in 1870, and in diligent reading. He retained his faculties to the last; nor did he ever lose much of that keen vigor which marked his most active days. His last literary work was a brochure in defence of the republican form of government. On September 3, 1877, while surrounded by the tender care of his wife and his sister-in-law, Mlle. Félicie Dosne, who later compiled and published Thiers' *Notes et Souvenirs*, he was suddenly stricken with apoplexy, and passed away peacefully. Although his wife refused the Assembly's offer of a public funeral, the last rites over his body were properly impressive, and almost all Paris followed the cortège to the cemetery. Thus departed the most famous of nineteenth-century literary statesmen, one of the most Gallic of Frenchmen—a man who should be classed in a category with such leading spirits as Henri Quatre, Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, and Napoleon.

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